witnesses

Committee fate depends on wi

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill said Thursday the fate of the embattled House assassinations committee may hinge on whether three witnesses can provide new information on the murder of Martin Luther King Jr.

O'Neill said comittee members believe they can get three witnesses who will shed new light on the King assassination. The identity of those three witnesses was not disclosed. One committee member said he believes James Earl Ray, convicted of murdering King, is not one of the three, though Ray has expressed a willingness to testify.

The speaker said after meeting with committee Democrats that they hope to salvage at least that much of the investigation from the ruins left by a dispute between Chairman Henry Gonzalez, D-Tex., and Richard Sprague, the panel's chief counsel.

The committee's mandate is to investigate the assassinations of both King and President John F. Kennedy. But committee members were talking Thursday of either dropping the Kennedy investigation or delaying it while proceeding with the King investigation.

When O'Neill was asked if he believes the House should keep the committee alive, he paused and said, "Well, let's just see what we're talking about with these three witnesses. I'm just led to believe that its evidence the American people would be keenly interested in."

The speaker said he understands the three witnesses have not previously be called to testify because of the committee's internal problems caused by the Gonzalez-Sprague coflict. That dispute led Gonzelez to send O'Neill his resignation as chairman Wednesday.

O'Neill said he has not decided whether to forward Gonzalez's resignation letter to the House, which would have to vote on whether to accept it.

The speaker also said any decision on whether to fire Sprague as chief counsel would be up to a new chairman if the House accepts Gonzalez's resignation. O'Neill said he wanted to talk to Gon-